

TWENTY-ONE

By D. C. Denison

Vince McMahon

Vince McMahon, the most successful wrestling promoter in the United States, is the man responsible for bringing Hulk Hogan, Captain Lou Albano, and other grapplers into living rooms all over the country, via syndicated and cable television programs. His World Wrestling Federation also books at least one wrestling event a month at Boston Garden. We spoke in McMahon's office in Greenwich, Connecticut.



Steve Taylor, Titan Sports, Inc.

1. Who gets the strongest negative reaction from the fans, the Iron Sheik, who is Iranian, or Nikolai Volkoff, the Russian?

It depends. If the Iron Sheik is wrestling a preliminary match, it's almost a foregone conclusion that the Iron Sheik is going to win. So there's obviously less reaction to him than if he was going to meet Hulk Hogan or Superfly Snuka.

2. How did you get involved with wrestling?

It actually goes back to my grandfather, who was promoting boxing in the old Madison Square Garden in New York. Boxing was very popular, but my grandfather saw more entertainment value in wrestling and began to spend about half of his time on wrestling. Then my father became involved, and the pendulum swung a little bit more in the direction of wrestling. Now we don't do any boxing at all.

3. Did you always know that you'd go into the wrestling business?

I always wanted it. But my dad wanted me to do something else. Any form of sports entertainment can be risky, and he wanted something better for me. But as a matter of fact, at one time I wanted to be a wrestler.

4. How did he feel about that?

He was adamantly opposed to it. It was something along the lines of, "Over my dead body." But I really wanted to participate in some fashion, and during the summers I began putting up wrestling rings, taking tickets, and so on, and I just fell in love with it.

5. What do wrestling and rock 'n' roll have in common?

A number of factors, really. For one thing, if you go to a rock 'n' roll concert or a wrestling match, like it or not, you will not

D. C. DENISON IS A BOSTON-BASED WRITER. EACH WEEK HE POSES 21 QUESTIONS TO A NOTABLE PERSON.

"There have definitely been some melees in the locker room that have been better than the matches out in the arena."

be bored. It's like a concert by the J. Geils Band. At one time I owned the Cape Cod Coliseum, and I really enjoyed some of the rock shows I saw there.

6. How long did you own the Coliseum?

For five years. I sold it about a year ago.

7. What effect has pop singer Cyndi Lauper had on wrestling?

I think she's had a positive effect. Among other things, she has rekindled an awareness for women's wrestling. The women's champion, Wendi Richter, whom she supports, is real tough, much like Cyndi. Cyndi is a tough little lady. She stands her ground. She may be somewhat diminutive in size, but in her heart she would be in the ring. She very much relates to everything that Wendi does in terms of wrestling, and she relates in general to the wrestling audience, which is somewhat similar to a rock audience. Our demographics are somewhat broader than the traditional MTV audience, but a good chunk of our audience, the 18-to-35 age group, is the same.

8. How do you respond to that eternal question about wrestling: Is it real or fake?

Or is it Memorex? I really don't respond to that question. I think it was done to death in the '20s. But I hasten to say that we're

in the sports entertainment field. It's important not to try to determine what wrestling is not. It doesn't fall into one particular category. It's not in the category of sport, in the strictest sense of the word. And it's not entertainment, in the strictest sense of the word. Its demographics are broad-based Americana. There are as many different reasons why people go to a wrestling event as there are people in attendance.

9. How do you get the talent?

We're the only national — or for that matter, international — producers. There are a lot of local and regional promoters, in the South and the Midwest and in little pockets here and there, and they develop quite a bit of talent. Also, a lot of our people are foreigners, and so there's no shortage of wrestling talent.

10. How often are you approached by someone with a concept or a gimmick that he thinks will be

the next big wrestling sensation?

Oh, many times. Under normal circumstances, when an athlete comes to us with a concept of what he would like to be, we don't give him the time of day. Because the first thing that a wrestler has to have is the ability to wrestle — that innate sense of timing and charisma that far exceeds in importance any kind of concept or gimmick. If that's all they have, it just won't work. They will forever be in Oklahoma City.

11. So what do you tell all these kids who want to be wrestlers?

We say, "Don't," from a number of standpoints. It's one of the roughest existences in sports entertainment, rough in terms of the physical abuse that you take, and rough in terms of the constant travel. It's just a grind, and unless you're extraordinarily gifted, we would generally discourage you from attempting to enter wrestling.

12. How many shows do you have on television now?

We have three shows on the USA network on cable. We have two events that are on WTBS, Ted Turner's superstation. Then we produce two different syndicated events, in addition to producing, for cable television, events for Madison Square Garden cable and Philadelphia Prism television. We've just entered into two other agreements in terms of

Continued on page 23

regional pay TV in other parts of the country.

13. Do you still do ringside announcing?
In terms of commentary, I still do some of that, but not nearly as much as I used to. I still enjoy the talent aspect of the business; but I see, in years to come, less opportunity to participate in talent and, unfortunately, more participation in administration, which I loathe.

14. Are you putting more effort into women's wrestling these days?

Yes. I see it as a growth area. I think that women's wrestling was an area that was overlooked for many years, and it wasn't until recently that a very attractive element, physically, began to enter ladies' wrestling. And with the advent of Cyndi Lauper and Wendi Richter now, there will be a deluge of female athletes who are nice-looking as well. Not that all women wrestlers have to be nice-looking, because they won't be. Just as all male wrestlers aren't handsome devils.

15. Do you ever stray from the good-guy-versus-the-bad-guy formula when you set up the matches?

Oh, yes. I think from a product-mix standpoint, there are any number of instances in which the fans would like to see a villainous-type individual against someone almost as villainous, or maybe more villainous, than he is, and vice versa. If you have two heroes, why not put them together? I don't think it necessarily diminishes one in the eyes of the fans if he loses. The Bruins sure don't win every night.

16. Are you planning any more productions with MTV?

We did that one piece with MTV, with Captain Lou Albano and Cyndi Lauper, and it was the second-highest rated show they've ever had, second only to Michael Jackson's debut, *Thriller*. Right now, MTV is in the development stages of trying to coax us into doing something else with them, and we're talking to them.

17. What is the wildest wrestling situation you've been involved in as a wrestling announcer?

Oh, probably a number of things that have happened in the dressing room. Someone comes in

the dressing-room area after having a lousy match, and the match continues from the ring into the dressing room. There have definitely been some melees in the locker room that have been better than the matches out in the arena.

18. What are your plans for the future?

Right now, wrestling is on about 100 television stations throughout the country. We have about an 87 percent penetration factor, which is very high. The ratings for our syndicated packages are higher than baseball, hockey, the NBA, college basketball, or anything like that. We think that those ratings will continue to rise.

19. Is it true you're getting into dolls and cartoons?

Yes. We've just entered into an agreement with a toy company that will be coming out with Hulk Hogan dolls, and Superfly Snuka dolls, and Andre the Giant dolls. We also just signed a deal with a company called DIC, which does cartoons. They just signed a development deal with CBS to put World Wrestling Federation wrestlers in cartoon form. A recent Q-factor test, which measures recognition,

shows Hulk Hogan and Superfly Snuka so far above everyone else that it's incredible. It's scary.

20. Are they ahead of, say, Superman?

Forget it. Superman is way down on the totem pole. Spiderman or Mister T don't even come close.

21. Can you describe the appeal of wrestling in one sentence?

I probably couldn't do it in a sentence. But it's been going on since the inception of man, and it's certainly one of the most natural things to do. It's not uncommon in animals, generally speaking. Look at little puppies: They wrestle. It's a natural thing to do, especially for males. From the playground era right on up, wrestling is one of the natural sports. And then you combine that with the fact that people have always been enthralled with might, size, and majesty. And you look at Hulk Hogan, at 6-foot-10 and 315 pounds, or whatever he is, and it's captivating. Everything that someone like that might do is of great interest to all of us mortals. •

"THANKS TO ONE OF THE big snows we had a couple of weeks ago, a lot of the wrestlers and (promoter) Eddie Marlin couldn't get from Nashville to Memphis to do our weekly TV show. So Marlin called Lance Russell (moderator of the TV rasslin' ruckus) and told him he'd have to be in charge. He told Lance to just wing it and put on the best TV show he could under the circumstances.

"So on that particular TV show, Lance did an interview with Jimmy Hart. During the interview they were talking about a match in which a sack of flour was going to be put on top of a pole, and whichever wrestler was able to get the sack of flour could use it against his opponent.

"Well, Hart brought a bag of flour to the TV interview and wound up dumping it on Lance Russell's head, right there on television. Lance got upset and told Hart, 'I'm sick of you! You're suspended! Eddie Marlin put me in charge, and I'm suspending you.'

"Hart then called Marlin to complain, claiming Lance didn't have the authority to suspend him. But Marlin confirmed that he had put Russell in charge of the show that day. So Marlin said the suspension was gonna stick."

As every good wrestling fan knows, however, getting rid of the cunning Jimmy Hart is tougher than eradicating male pattern baldness.

HART, YOU SEE, IS NOT EXACTLY a wrestler. But he is not exactly a non-wrestler either. "His primary activities are managing," says Lawler. But when one of Hart's gorillas gets into trouble in the ring, Hart sometimes renders a little bareknuckled assistance.

Rather than swallow his suspension, therefore, Hart offered promoter Marlin a deal. Included in Hart's managerial stable was Eddie Gilbert, the reigning

heavyweight champion of the entire South. So Hart's pitch to Marlin was this: "Pick any wrestler you want to fight Gilbert. If Gilbert loses, not only will I accept the 30-day suspension, I will leave town and be out of your hair for a whole year. If Gilbert wins, my suspension is lifted and whoever he beats has to leave town."

Promoter Marlin picked up the gauntlet... and chose Lawler as the defender of righteousness.

For about 29 agonizing minutes in the "Loser Leave Town" melee last Monday, Lawler's reign as King of the Krunchers was in dire jeopardy. But purity, truth and justice prevailed; Lawler tied Gilbert into a pretzel and Hart, the Darth Vader of professional body-slammings, presumably was banished for 12 months to the far reaches of the Eye-Gouging Empire.

But does that mean ringside really is safe from the resourceful Hart?

"I don't think he'll be able to come back," said Lawler. "He won't be allowed to be at any matches. He won't be booked. And if you're not booked, you're not paid. So Jimmy Hart would be stupid to show up."

MAYBE SO — BUT WHO WAS that lurking in the shadows of the coliseum during the "Loser Leave Town" showdown?

"When we got to the coliseum Monday night, Eddie Gilbert had this guy with him who would pass for an identical twin of Jimmy Hart," said Lawler. "Everybody at the coliseum was amazed. This guy was like a Jimmy Hart clone. I know it wasn't Hart, because, believe me, I know Jimmy Hart. But this guy was like his duplicate."

Two Harts against one King? Well, nobody ever said pro rasslin' was fair.

Al Dunning One King is enough

MEMPHIS ALREADY HAS lost one of its Kings, and for a harrowing few minutes last week we were in danger of losing the other one.

Had it happened, busloads of fans who deposit wreaths on the grave of Elvis 'The King' Presley at Graceland might also have paused to pitch posies into the Mid-South Coliseum in memory of Jerry 'The King' Lawler.

Lawler is the incumbent monarch of Memphis professional wrestlers and star of Monday Night Mayhem at the coliseum.

Among most connoisseurs of cauliflower ears, Lawler is regarded as one of the good guys. Because good triumphed over evil in a "Loser Leave Town" match last Monday night, Lawler is still among us. Had the forces of darkness won, Lawler would have been exiled for an entire year.

What happened, according to Lawler, was this: